Int. j. adv. multidisc. res. stud. 2025; 5(6):1125-1137

Received: 16-10-2025
Accepted: 26-11-2025

International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

ISSN: 2583-049X

Performance Building Process in Inter-Company Cooperation Agreements: A Case Study of 6 Companies

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Abstract
This article aims to understand the process of building performance through inter-company cooperation agreements. To access the real world, we conducted a multiple case study through intra- and inter-case analysis, providing the opportunity to make our conclusions sufficiently comfortable on the analysis of attitudes, representations and behaviors identified within the observed cases. We selected 06 cases of companies belonging to different sectors of activity, but each having in its own journey, established, experienced an inter-company cooperation relationship. The field surveys were carried out on the basis of a guide and an interview protocol with company managers. The collected and collated data were subjected to a thematic content analysis. The results show that any form of AC considered in any company is undergoing a gradual evolution that impacts almost all of the company's functions. AC is positioning itself as a new dynamic, which is imperative for business leaders. To achieve this, business leaders must make significant efforts to develop original strategies. The cooperation agreements developed within the case studies made it possible to observe the deployment of performance at five levels: mastering proxemics effects; developing organizational flexibility; strengthening organizational capacity and gaining expertise in the transnational nature of business.

Keywords: Cooperation Agreement, Performance, Inter-Company

1. Introduction

The goal of any company that wants to survive is to perform well. The pursuit of performance in business is a constant quest, an obsession. There are several ways for a company to build its performance. Performance is a multidimensional and complex concept (Blanchot, 2006). The issue of performance is at the heart of managerial and economic literature with the intensification of globalisation (Affaghrou w. 2023).

In fact, since the advent of globalisation, with an expanded and turbulent economic space (Desgardins B. 1977), we have seen a significant increase in the use of cooperation agreements (CAs) as a means of building performance. For Van de van (2004), inter-organisational cooperation is considered the foundation of performance. Moreover, it is an effective means of transferring knowledge and sharing experiences (Salvetat *et al*. 2011).

CA, understood in the first analysis in the sense of Dussauge and Garette (1995) as symmetrical and sustainable cooperation between two companies, based on a formal or informal contract, with the aim of carrying out projects together and establishing lasting collaboration, thus becomes a strategic lever for building performance.

Indeed, CAs appear to be medium- or long-term collaborative relationships between companies, based on contracts, involving two or more legally distinct companies (Bilongo and Evindi, 2023). To this end, CAs can cover a variety of areas or aspects (Fatehi *et al*. 2019). These agreements may be concluded for a variety of reasons, such as seeking new opportunities, accessing complementary resources or even accelerating the acquisition of technological skills (Aggarwal and Kapoor, 2019).

One of the problems with CAs is that they are formed between companies with differing levels of comfort (Evindi and Bilongo, 2024). Noting that inter-company cooperation relationships are formed between companies of different sizes, resources and skills, organisational cultures and cooperation experiences, Mahamadou Z. (2016) concludes that these agreements are asymmetrical. This characteristic raises questions about the relationship between cooperation agreements and performance. For some, such as Fatehi *et al*. (2019), CAs may encounter difficulties in achieving their objectives and may fail.

For others, Laras *et al*. (2021), CAs undoubtedly lead to performance. Accepting the hypothesis that CAs contribute to the construction of performance, the purpose of this article is to understand the performance resulting from CAs and to answer the following question: how is performance built in an AC?

The question of how leads to the identification of the means and processes by which this performance is achieved. In doing so, we will also describe the types of performance observed. Our research is based on a case study of six cases from different sectors of activity, all of which have entered into formal ACs at different stages in their development.

Based on our research question and given the complexity of the subject matter, we will first show that the relationship between cooperation agreements and performance is an objective and living reality by drawing on a number of theoretical insights that may justify this reality. Secondly, we will consider a cross-sectional analysis of our central question. The experiences of the actors will then enable us to establish the constant factors in the construction of performance in inter-company cooperation agreements.

2. Inter-Company Cooperation Agreements and Performance: A Living and Objective Reality

The popularity of the concept of performance has become a central concern in companies, since numerous studies have confirmed the relationship between inter-organisational cooperation and performance (Affaghrou, 2023). However, it can be observed that the performance resulting from CAs can have different meanings (Al Mouhani *et al*. 2021), and this performance can be assessed by the perceived failures or successes of the partners (Das and Teng, 2003). This reminder leads us to wonder whether the ambiguities and dimensions given to these concepts will not escape the ambiguities of previous concepts such as productivity, performance, value, competitiveness, joint ventures and partnerships.

It therefore seems prudent to define the deeper meaning of these plural concepts. This effort to understand them will enable us to pave the way for research into the determinants of CA performance.

2.1 Definitions and Characteristics of the Concepts of CA and Performance.

Mastering the concepts of CA and performance is useful work, as the characteristics and contextual use of each of these concepts can reflect contingent realities. It is imperative to clearly define and characterise these multi-purpose concepts.

2.1.1 Inter-Company Design Agreements: A Plural Definition

Inter-company cooperation agreements or strategic alliances are a common organisational practice among companies. They are also an important subject of management research. Despite the interest and questions they raise, they are characterised by the absence of a single frame of reference (Mahamadou Z. 2016). In fact, there are as many definitions of CAs as there are studies on the subject. In order to better understand the concept, we have used several approaches to define it. This approach should enable us to arrive at a comprehensive definition and characterise CAs.

Koeing and Thietart (1987) use the term mutual organisation to refer to CAs. In the same vein, Bresser (1989) describes CAs as a collective strategy. A broader initial view is proposed by Garette (1989), who states that CAs refer to a union, a commitment to mutual support and assistance between partners with a view to ensuring the peace and security of each of them in the face of danger or risk. For Ingham (1991), CA is simply a learning tool designed to transfer skills or knowledge between partner organisations.

It can be observed that in a joint venture, at least two companies pool or combine a fraction of their resources to pursue joint objectives in a given area and obtain mutual benefits; if this results in interdependence in a given field of action, the actions remain autonomous outside the scope of cooperation.

In another approach, Garette and Dussauge (1995) consider the CA to be a ‘particular form of collaboration between several independent companies that pool their skills, means or resources to carry out a project or activity rather than competing with each other in a difficult competitive environment’. From this definition, they identify three specific features or characteristics of CAs: the existence of several decision-making centres, the conflicting nature of interests and objectives, and ongoing negotiation.

Following in the footsteps of the various authors cited above, Bellon, A. Ben Youssef and A. Plunket (2001) argue that inter-company joint ventures are long-term agreements between independent companies. In other words, they are cooperative arrangements set up to achieve strategic objectives.

It is in this sense that Evindi C. and Bilongo, R (2024) suggest considering CAs as medium- or long-term agreements between companies based on contracts and involving two or more legally distinct companies located in different countries.

The location argument is superseded by the definition of Al Mouhani *et al* (2021), who suggest that CAs should be considered as any formal or informal long-term agreement or balance of power, coordinated between two or more independent companies, joining or sharing part of their capacities, resources and power, establishing a certain degree of interrelation in order to increase their competitive advantages.

Two key points can be made from the definitions provided: ACs are understood to mean the more or less extensive interaction between the activities of two legally separate companies (Michèle Heiz, 2000). The general principle underlying these relationships between companies is that each party provides the other with what it lacks. It is therefore a dynamic of complementarity between companies (Mahamadou Z., 2016). Based on these two observations, we maintain throughout our article that a CA is simply an organisational structure in which partner companies are motivated to act in a concerted manner to share their specific skills in order to achieve or realise specific objectives. This form of organisation should lay the foundations for building performance.I.1.2. Performance: a multifaceted concept.Numerous studies have focused on the concept of performance, its measurement and its management. However, the definition of the concept remains variable and is determined by the subject of the study and its context.

Inter-company ACs are a specific organisational form, in a specific context and designed for a fixed period of time. It is therefore necessary to adopt a definition of performance that is tailored to the context. With this argument in mind, we will focus more on the different approaches that can help us

to arrive at a comprehensive definition.
In Le Robert (2016), performance simply means "an accomplishment, an execution ‘. Based on this definition, performance has been used in different fields and contexts. In the field of sport, for example, the Larousse dictionary (2016) defines performance in the context of sporting competition as ’the result achieved by an athlete or racehorse in an event". In the same dictionary, performance is also considered to be ‘a successful result obtained in an undertaking or work’.
From this approach to definition, a common misconception is to consider performance as synonymous with success linked to a result achieved, or even satisfaction felt at the outcome of that result.
This view of performance is corroborated by Folan *et al*. (2007), when the co-authors state: "the use of the term perform itself can come to mean “positive progress” in itself, without any qualifying objective applied to the term. Les significations du terme « performance » lorsqu'il est utilisé pour désigner un « exploit » ou une « réalisation » sont analogues à cela.
The different perceptions of performance are reinforced by the analysis provided by Lebas (1995). In his analysis, Lebas highlights the different perceptions that people can have of the term performance. ‘Few people agree on what performance really means: it can mean anything from efficiency, to robustness or resistance or return on investment, or plenty of other definitions never fully specified.’
Based on this pluralistic perception, Le Moigne (1996) suggests putting the concept into perspective. To this end, he uses the metaphor of horse racing and asserts that ‘for organisations, as for racehorses, performance is relative: it is not a question of doing “well”. It is a question of not doing worse than others.’ In fact, the logic of acceptable or positive results is once again put into perspective.
As if to settle the perspectives on performance mentioned above, Pesqueux (2004) takes a stand and declares that performance ‘therefore involves the idea of quality of execution and staging aimed at identity, based on the belief that it can be measured and that it is good to benchmark oneself against something that has happened’.
The author thus identifies performance as a form of quality and therefore success, while systematically associating it with the condition that this quality can be measured.
Delving deeper into the field of research, we can see that performance is referred to in several scientific fields. A fundamental observation made in numerous publications on corporate performance is that the term performance has flourished in its financial dimension. The work of authors such as Bouquin (2001), Bescos *et al*. (1993), Bourguignon (1995), Lebas (1995), Bessire (1999), Dehou and Berland (2007) and many others is a relevant illustration of this.
With socio-economic changes, shifts in culture and attitudes, and technological shocks and changes in the business environment, it has been observed that the approach to performance based solely on the productivity and profitability of the company, as advocated by Anthony (1965), has been superseded by a more comprehensive approach to the concept, incorporating multiple aspects into its definition (Marmuse, 1977).
Indeed, the opening up of vast economic markets and the consideration of social movements and organisational restructuring have gradually catalysed the broadening of the concept of performance. Performance now combines both an internal dimension within the company, judged by the effectiveness and efficiency of the resources used, and an external dimension (Bitton (1990); Nagia (1994); Dohou (2009); Essid and Berland (2011)). This same performance is now impacted by a number of factors, including the context of globalisation Lallemant (2006), sustainable development Capron and Quairel (2006), the ISO 26000 standard, Spangerber *et al*. (2002).
External performance is therefore linked in particular to the company's competitive position, its relationship with various stakeholders, prices, products, their quality and availability, Stalk (1988), Wilson (1994), Verma and Pullman (1998), as well as their innovative and eco-responsible nature.
Internal performance continues to be linked primarily to resource utilisation, system management, employee motivation, industrial system flexibility and organisational learning (Kaplan and Norton (2005); Berland and Essid (2002); Colledani *et al*. (2014)).
It is worth noting that the various approaches to defining performance, both internally and externally, by companies reinforce, or rather drive, the results- and objectives-based approach to definition. For example, industrial performance can be explained by results achieved in accordance with a strategy in order to achieve objectives.
Today, these objectives are broken down according to multiple performance criteria such as cost, quality and time (Lorino (1996); Clivillé (2004); Kaplan and Norton (2004); Humez (2008)), innovation (Azzone and Noci, 1998), and sustainable development (Capron and Quairel, 2006).
The objectives have also been linked, successively, to different methods and approaches for steering their achievement, specifically management, steering and performance management methods (Ali Shah (2012); Vernadat *et al*. (2013); Giannopoulos (2015)). These objectives contribute to the characterisation of CA performance.
The literature on performance allows us to understand that performance is a concept linked to a result obtained, related to the achievement of an objective, and, equivalently, to the execution of an action. Performance can thus be identified with the result obtained by the system responsible for achieving the objective, but also with the success potentially associated with this success.
Furthermore, it can be observed that performance has evolved and goes beyond the Taylorist concept, revolving around the triptych of efficiency, effectiveness and efficacy. Depending on the context, it can be deployed in line with current criteria in a globalised business world, namely cost, quality, lead time, innovation and sustainable development. Through what mechanisms can this performance be built on the basis of inter-company cooperation agreements?

2.2 The Objective and Living Reality of Performance in CAs

Work on the link or relationship between CAs and performance is based on a consolidated theoretical foundation and lively debates in the literature. The numerous studies identified for this purpose, showing that CAs and performance are intertwined or consubstantial, reflect the objective and living reality of the relationship between the two concepts.
The characteristics of performance are reinforced by different theories under two performance logics, Taghozouti

et al. (2016): efficiency logic and institutional logic, which complement and reinforce each other to create a conceptual framework from which the main internal and external factors of a high-performing CA can be conceived. Transactional and productive approaches will constitute our main field of reference.

2.2.1 Justification of CA Performance from the Perspective of Transaction Cost Theory

Transaction Cost Theory (TCT) provides a framework for analysing CA performance. It allows for differentiation in the performance (efficiency) of cooperation between two companies.

The transactional model developed by Coase (1937), revisited and expanded upon by Williamson (1981) based on the concept of exchange referred to as a 'transaction', emphasises that minimising transaction costs is a key objective for any business. It distinguishes between the costs of information on the markets and the costs of negotiating and concluding contracts.

The choice of organisational form depends on the efficiency or performance it provides (company-market or cooperation). The problem is therefore to determine the form that minimises costs and thus leads to performance.

A comparative analysis of these costs between two situations: one where the company carries out an activity on its own (hierarchy) and one where it calls on another company to carry it out (market), will determine its choice and organisational behaviour. When the transaction costs borne by the company are higher when it carries out an activity itself, it has the activity carried out by another company in order to benefit from the cost savings offered by this alternative. It is with this objective in mind that inter-company ACs are developed.

Consequently, CAs have emerged as a timely alternative capable of providing companies with more efficient forms of economic organisation. According to Dussauge and Garette (1996), CAs constitute 'an intermediate form of exchange, neither entirely a market nor entirely a separate organisation', but one that produces performance. This vision is what prefigured productive approaches.

2.2.2 Productive Approaches: Models for Strengthening and Improving the Performance of CAs

Unlike transactional theories, productive approaches advocate the dynamic efficiency of productive systems through the development of organisational skills that every company should possess. Two models have been proposed: the organisation-environment interaction model and the complementarity approach.

2.2.2.1 The Performance of CAs in the Organisation-Environment Interaction Model

The reality of performance in CAs can be understood successively in the resource approach; the development of dynamic capabilities, strategic skills management and the strengthening of the relational vision.

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The resource-based view of organisational performance, pioneered by Penrose (1959) and theorised since Wernerfelt's work (1984), considers that differences in organisational success can be explained by the characteristics of the resources available to them.

Thus, for Fernandez and Le Roy (2016), due to the complexity of products and services, it is difficult for a company to possess and/or develop all the resources it needs on its own. In the same vein, Bengtsson and Kock (2000) establish that the heterogeneity of resources between organisations makes them potentially complementary and interdependent.

This view implies a certain idea of performance in the AC organisational form based on resources and skills. It is in this logic that Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) believe that the AC form, by providing access to certain resources, constitutes a way of building performance by circumventing shocks, disruptions and uncertainty in external environments.

It is therefore agreed that the joint resources mobilised within the framework of a CA occupy an axiological position in explaining business performance. These resources are "all the assets, capabilities, organisational processes, attributes of the company, information and knowledge controlled by a company that enable it to design and implement strategies likely to These resources are 'all assets, capabilities, organisational processes, company attributes, information and knowledge controlled by a company that enable it to design and implement strategies likely to increase its effectiveness and efficiency'.

Barney (1991) and Hamel and Prahalad (1994) argue that companies capable of achieving sustainable performance are those that have mastered distinctive, non-imitable and difficult-to-access skills. The tacit and specific nature of resources leads top management to seek, through inter-company ACs, to benefit from the complementary resources held by other partners.

According to resource theory, cooperation partners aim to exploit their complementary assets in order to gain a more competitive position. Serieyx (2000) states in this regard that 'the companies that will prevail are those that know how to base their advantages on the best combination of intelligence, knowledge and skills that they aggregate to continuously create greater performance that makes a difference'.

The perspective based on strategic skills management established by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) justifies the conclusion, functioning and performance in CAs by integrating management into the framework of inter-organisational relations (Prévot *et al*., 2010).

Core competencies, identified from a relational perspective between organisations, can be exploited in a logic of learning through concerted action. This approach conceives cooperation as a strategic option for the company (Doz and Hamel (2000); Das and Teng (2000)) or as an appropriate response to the challenge posed by environmental change (Doz and Hamel, 2000). Managers are faced with a range of strategic behaviours from which to choose the most effective development options. They opt for a CA not because it minimises costs (economic approach), but because it represents the most effective solution in terms of strategic advantage and performance (Ingham, 1991).

The strategic behaviour school of thought raises the question of competitive strategies for companies. These strategies can be represented by three possible configurations (Aliouat, 1996): confrontation, avoidance, and cooperation. Cooperation is considered a renunciation of all forms of rivalry, while avoidance renounces all forms of direct competitive confrontation. This school of thought recognises the particularity of cooperation strategies. They are considered atypical behaviours (Aliouat, 1996).

Among the various strategic behaviours of cooperation, alliances or ACs between competitors occupy a special place due to their ambiguity (Porter, 1987). In the competitive advantage approach, ACs would optimise the respective value chains of the companies involved in the cooperation.

CA is seen as a way for allies to maximise their performance and create or consolidate a competitive advantage. Cooperation strategies are part of a complementary approach that encourages the emergence of imperfect markets. These markets in turn promote value creation, strengthening companies' competitive advantages. CA is therefore considered a strategic option that allows companies to benefit from avoiding confrontation.

Teece *et al*. (1997) note that in a changing and dynamic environment, dynamic capabilities that translate all specific and identifiable processes promote the development of CAs, enabling organisations to adapt to market changes. These capabilities enable the organisation to seize numerous existing opportunities, but also to ensure the performance of the AC through a specific way of integrating, reconfiguring, acquiring and removing resources in order to adapt to changes in the environment.

The relational view of CA arising from these capabilities shows that it is not possible to produce and distribute products and services alone in a globalised context. CA thus becomes essential (Doz and Hamel, 2000). The fundamental idea is that by forging links with various public and private partners and forming alliances, companies can avoid having to compete in a market where the outcome is uncertain and generally damaging.

In doing so, they are able to organise the market to avoid its rigours, i.e. the effects of a cruel confrontation that would undermine their performance. It is in this sense that Ingham (1991) asserts that CA reflects genuinely cooperative behaviour whereby the parties involved deliberately seek to serve their own strategic objectives, but also to achieve mutually beneficial results, i.e. their performance.

From this perspective, the role and importance of CA are clearly evident in the dynamics of information sharing and exchange (Dyer and Singh, 1998, cited in Prévot *et al*., 2010). Furthermore, the existence of synergy effects linked to the complementarity of partners' resources and skills, and the possibility of establishing appropriate governance mechanisms likely to better govern the relationship between partners, position CA as a means of developing the performance of position CA as a means of developing organisational performance in an unstable environment.

2.2.2.2 CA Performance in the Complementarity Approach

In the context of complementarity, it should be noted that inter-company CAs can develop between companies or between non-complementary activities. However, complementarity between companies seems to improve the effectiveness of CAs. Fall (2009) suggests that this complementarity is established between activities that require different skills and that it encourages the respective profitability of the companies involved in the cooperation, leading to a win-win situation.

The literature we have just reviewed clearly shows the objective existence of a relationship or link between inter-company cooperation agreements and performance. Understanding how this link is constructed requires a cross-sectional analysis of the inter-company cooperation experiences developed in six cases in our study.

3. Cross-Sectional Analysis of Inter-Company Cooperation Experiences in the different Cases.

In order to analyse the recommendations identified in the literature review, given the complexity of the relationship or, rather, the construction of performance through CA, we will first clarify the methodological choices made to access reality. Next, we will consider the approach to performance construction in CAs.

3.1 Methodology

To understand how performance is constructed in CAs, we felt that the case study strategy (Yin, 2003) was appropriate. Favouring an in-depth study of a limited number of cases for a better understanding of the phenomenon, multiple case studies using intra- and inter-case analysis could offer the possibility of drawing sufficiently reliable conclusions on the analysis of attitudes, representations and behaviours.

We selected six cases of companies belonging to different sectors of activity, but each of which had, at some point in its history, established and experienced a relationship of inter-company cooperation. These cases should enable us to discover the heterogeneity and variability of the issue (Wacheux, 1996).

In order to ensure consistency in the strategic facts, we wanted the cases to have sufficient features in common. The common features that enabled us to select the cases that make up our theoretical sample are as follows: Congolese companies that have established and are experiencing inter-company cooperation, are privately funded, and operate in the formal sector. Table 1 below provides an overview of the cases selected and some of their characteristics.

Table 1: Synoptic presentation of case characteristics

	FGAE	ACG	CODEC	SECO	GSPRAF	SDV
Date of creation	1993	2005	1987	2016	2014	2020
Legal status	SARL	SA	SA	SARL	SARL	SARL
Number of employees	120	140	428	70	70	96
Activité	Higher education training company	Marketing and distribution of refined petroleum products and derivatives.	Business and development mutual financial institution	Medical care health clinic	Manufacture and marketing of toilet paper	International intercity transport and travel
Sector	Educational services	Industrie	Banking services	Health services	Industry	Service
Nature of activity	Organisational learning and networking Complementarity	AC Cost minimisation	AC Participation and capital commitment Management control	Additive and complementary. Networking	AC Complementary and cost minimisation	AC based on management and capital commitment

Source: Authors.

To access reality, we developed an interview guide and protocol based on five items likely to provide us with information on the subject of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with business leaders who had experienced periods of inter-company cooperation. Back-and-forth discussions were necessary when certain points of view that contradicted the literature and facts observed in the field needed to be clarified.

We also consulted internal company archives and a number of specialist journals. The data collected and collated was subjected to content analysis by theme and category. Data triangulation was carried out using a variety of sources, existing documentation and the abundant literature on the subject.

The sectoral diversity of the cases selected reflects the intensity of the activity that will require the possible conclusion of a joint venture agreement for the case to flourish in the market segment. From this point of view, attitudes and behaviours also vary according to the objectives sought by the joint venture agreement. It should be noted that any joint venture agreement must take into account the comfort of the case in terms of legal status and strategic intent developed from the vision of the managers. Table 2 below specifies the attitudes and behaviours in favour of the joint venture agreement.

The characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours in terms of the CA operating process justify the level of performance observed in the cases.

3.2 Building Performance in CAs: A Sequential and Methodical Approach

To better understand the process of performance building in CAs, two major stages emerged from the content analysis carried out after the survey. These were the identification of the logic and main phases of CA development, and the process of formulating a form of CA to activate performance. These two stages, which interact dynamically, develop the foundations for objective performance.

3.2.1 The Logic and Main Phases of CA Development

Observations based on practical experience of the cases studied show that there are a number of phases corresponding to the different CAs entered into. The logic of the CA seems to emerge from the underlying objectives of the agreement. The development processes and strategic framework within which a CA is established for a company appear to be inseparable from internal and external incentives. The company seems compelled to go beyond its immediate frame of reference, i.e. its business lines, markets and usual geographical horizon. It is therefore naturally led to deploy cooperation approaches tailored to its specific situation.

Tableau 2: Vue synoptique des attitudes et comportements des cas

	FGAE	ACG	CODEC	SECO	CS PRAF	SDV
Objectives	Be more responsive to customer needs	Gain market share	Build bridges between the formal and informal sectors	Develop medical services with higher added value	Increase turnover and profits	Ensure the long-term viability of the company and guarantee its continued profitability
Motivations	Become a giant and a benchmark	Grow rapidly, technological capacity	Opportunity to build up substantial savings, develop new products	Reach critical mass to exist	Good knowledge of the market	Existing market potential
Purpose	Technical and commercial	Technical and commercial	Technical and commercial	Technical	Commercial	Technical and commercial
Mode	Shared development	Organic	Organic	Organic and shared	Organic	Organic and shared
Attitude	Offensive and defensive	Offensive	Offensive	Offensive and defensive	Defensive	Offensive
Process	With planning	With planning	With planning	Qualitative planning	With planning	With planning

Source: Authors.

There are no examples of cases where a definitive mode of cooperation could be envisaged from the outset. CA appears above all to be the result of a more or less rapid evolution, marked by advances, plateaus and sometimes setbacks, most often distinct in their characteristics from one company to another. This progression may initially be towards proximity. This refers to proximity in terms of skills, meaning the ability to perform the same job and follow the same strategy. It then moves towards complexity, at the cost of successive adaptations of the strategy and transformations of the organisation.

Any attempt at cooperation is thus accompanied by organisational change, which follows the successive expansion of the areas covered and the objectives of the CA. The gradual nature of the process, linked to the acquisition of essential experience, most often translates into a gradual approach to cooperation, marked by the crossing of successive thresholds which, for each company, depend on incentives that are sometimes specific. This propensity, revealed in several cases, is reflected in an assessment of existing production capacity; in the adaptation of production capacity to the objectives of opening up; and in the prerequisite skills and conditions of know-how.

These requirements lead companies to master all or part of the functions of management, production, finance, human resources, etc. It is therefore easy to understand that the methods used to formulate the CA are based either on structured approaches that fit in with the company's overall objectives. Methodically, a very broad range of information of various kinds is included, prioritised and organised to establish carefully considered guidelines.

This approach is based on rigorous planning of developments to be anticipated within the reference space chosen by the company; or on more empirical approaches, which are also necessary insofar as the information is not homogeneous or even easy to obtain in contexts that are sometimes difficult, hostile and varied.

Indeed, the Congolese context, for example, does not always offer economic benchmarks comparable to those of other partner countries. This information is also essential for companies that are not yet sufficiently aware of the methodical approach to these references, or that are forced to deal quickly with unexpected situations requiring a rapid response.

Ultimately, it can be noted that the structured approach emerged very quickly in certain cases, following a consistent pattern and continuing over a long period with virtually identical principles (the cases of ACG and CSPRAF). It also resulted, but more quickly, in a systematic approach with significant constants, as soon as technology made small markets more accessible and globalisation took shape (the cases of FGAE and SDV).

However, the empirical approach cannot be separated from this initial approach, as both had to react very quickly to a change in the environment, which was essentially technological, forcing them to move beyond their traditional areas of activity. These efforts required clarification of the main phases of CA development.

3.2.1.2 The Main Phases of CA Development

One of the questions asked of our various interviewees was: ‘How did you go about establishing your cooperation agreement?’ Analysis of the content of the various interviews revealed two main phases: the identification of key strategic factors and the development of a kind of strategic roadmap.

The distinctive criteria for cooperation strategies may vary depending on the sector. Based on business development concerns, they rely on the potential existence of a competitive advantage. Competitive advantages correspond to a higher degree of mastery of a key success factor. It is therefore the relative degree of key success factors that will enable the cooperation process. Table 3 below illustrates the strategic arguments that emerged from the various interviews with company managers.

Table 3: Key strategic arguments

- Development of new products.
- Development of new skills or behaviours.
- Introduction of new technologies.
- Specific innovation and organisational transformation.
- Product transformation.
- Argumentation for the development of the finance function.
- Review of development policy.
- Acquisition of new equipment.
- Creation of specialised services.

Source: Authors.

These arguments have made it possible to develop strategic maps with multiple implications. From the point of view of the interlocutors, a strategic map is constructed when it is possible to identify relevant areas of cooperation.

Thus, by taking, for example, the degree of specialisation (to refer to the scope of the segments targeted by the cooperation) and the source of competitive advantage (brand, technology, etc.), it is possible, according to field surveys, to justify the choice of services/markets.

Taking this logic into account, we can see that CA is the result of decision-making based on incentives or, better still, internal and external triggers, to which managers are more or less sensitive, initiating or influencing a cooperation process that generally results in successive stages of progress, ranging from cautious, initial, experimental cooperation to CA with a long-term global ambition in remarkable cases. So what ultimately motivates the conclusion of the forms of CA observed?

3.2.1.3 Incentives for Cooperation

Based on the cases observed, several factors appear to encourage the use of CA. Each of these factors plays a specific role in promoting the shifts in objectives and structural transformations that correspond to each mode of cooperation envisaged.

Our content analysis enabled us to group the incentives into three categories, based on the model developed by Dunning *et al.* (1995). Each category defines a specific type of benefit to be gained from cooperation. From this perspective, the incentives were grouped according to whether they provide an internalisation advantage. The specific benefit is an essential prerequisite for CA. It covers intangible assets resulting from the size and positions acquired by the company.

Factors such as innovation capacity and technological expertise, skilled personnel, financing capacity and, in general, all factors relating to the assessment of existing production capacity proved to be decisive.

Location advantages requiring cooperation with a spatial dimension focus on transport and accessibility. These incentives foreshadow the process of formulating and activating performance in cooperation agreements.

3.2.2 From the Process of Formulating a form of CA to Activating Performance

Performance is built through a process of formulating and reformulating the cooperation approach. This approach is solidified by well-targeted preliminary steps. These two prerequisites are the determining factors of the performance induced by inter-company CA.

3.2.2.1 The Process of Formulating/Reformulating a Cooperation Approach

The logic behind the process of formulating a cooperation agreement is part of the company's overall strategy. It is within the framework of the company's main areas of development that the objectives of a possible cooperation are outlined. In this context, various internal data concerning the company and external data relating to its competitive environment are taken into account.

This data is generally cross-checked and summarised before being used in the formulation process. This is an iterative process that must be constantly adapted in response to any difficulties and successes encountered by the company, as well as to changes in the context.

A close reading of the FGAE case study reveals two key dimensions in the choices and progress made. On the one hand, the level of resources available to FGAE, defining the relevant reference space, and on the other hand, the characteristics of the sector and in particular its degree of globalisation.

Therefore, the upstream stages of the cooperation process, environmental and sectoral analysis combined with risk analysis as part of the ongoing monitoring function, take on their full meaning. They provide two types of information for the process: upstream, the information essential for developing and adapting the overall approach, setting objectives and key decisions relating to choices, modes of cooperation and their implementation; downstream, the elements necessary for the continuous adaptation of structures and procedures and, possibly, the reorientation of the system.

The basis of FGAE's cooperation approach is revealed in three ways: through its overall strategy, which is already strongly focused on international activities. Indeed, the training courses offered have an international outlook; through its assessment of opportunities in a highly competitive market; and through its ambition to always play the only role that preserves its future: that of a leader controlling significant market shares.

By analysing the company's own resources – commercial experience, product originality, the universally applicable name ‘FGAE’, sound financial situation, membership of a powerful group with proven experience and structure for a high-profile company, making its project realistic.

From then on, the formulation of the main cooperation options takes shape logically, based on these preliminary steps, through the following three elements: its long-term objectives: to become and remain No. 1 in private education in the Republic of Congo and to acquire significant market share in the main African markets through academic mobility. The implementation constraints it has set itself (cautious, only envisaging the approach of new, well-targeted markets). The limits, determined by its management (control of 35 to 40% of market share).

Based on this formulation, it is essentially market potential, existing relationships and proximity that dictate the choice of markets. It is therefore logical that cooperation from the Brazzaville site is chosen as the initial approach, with a local partner then being found due to the distance involved.

Beyond that, the following steps will be taken: breaking down the objectives into the various functions of the company and organising them within the framework of rigorous planning; implementation and achievement; then ongoing monitoring and control of results.

These steps will lead to the redefinition of the cooperation strategy at its various levels, which in this case will result in particular in the broadening of the initial target.

The cross-sectional analysis carried out on all cases seemed to confirm the systematic applicability of the FGAE approach. Thus, while in all cases the formulation exercise can only be positive, it should also be recognised that for some companies it allows them to become aware of and rationalise the data relating to their approach. For others, it provides immediate access to answers that enable them to determine their response in favour of choosing a form of inter-company cooperation agreement.

For each company, it is therefore necessary to follow, in their logic, if not in detail, the main steps that structure the process of implementing a cooperation agreement, without prejudice to a more complete formulation at a later stage.

The framework for defining the preliminary stages is, of course, linked to: identifying and/or analysing (screening) opportunities; assessing the resources that can be mobilised for this purpose; and the relationship with the company's core values and overall strategic priorities, insofar as these have been determined in advance.

Based on these three areas of consideration and information, it will then be possible to envisage, on the one hand, defining the main lines of the cooperation strategy, i.e. determining the project and the limits of commitment, and defining the quantitative and qualitative objectives selected and, on the other hand, determining the key options for selecting and choosing the mode of cooperation.

3.2.2.2 Preliminary Steps in Formulating a Cooperation Agreement

The two main initial steps in formulating a CA are identifying opportunities/threats and assessing the company's strengths and weaknesses. These two steps must be considered simultaneously, as they complement each other and interact at the preliminary reflection stage. Indeed, these must be assessed in terms of: the positive or negative impact they are likely to have on the company (e.g. prospects for new opportunities or reduced supply costs, in one sense: risk of market loss or creation of constraints in terms of actions or reactions they elicit from the company, depending on its resources, its already defined priorities, its organisation or its expertise, without jeopardising its future.

From this perspective, an objective analysis of the company's potential in relation to its environment is not sufficient to formulate a cooperation approach. Beyond size, financial situation, nature of activities, etc., which are part of the diagnosis, it is necessary to take into account pre-existing elements that are more qualitative, even subjective, corresponding to long-term components of strategic orientations. In a way, the company's values that are likely to determine its attitude, both as an organisation and as asocial entity on the one hand, and on the other hand, elements relating to the personality of the manager and his or her vision of things. The cross-sectional analysis carried out on all cases reveals the predominant influence of a company's overall strategy or general policy on cooperation, in a context characterised by profound changes. Indeed, because the company must now face new challenges, different in nature andscope from those it faced in a stable environment, it is now forced to consider its choice in favour ofcooperation along three main and largely independent axes:

Controlling its profitability, which becomes the best support for its development and cooperation, guaranteeing its freedom of manoeuvre while ensuring its ability to raise the necessary funds for its activities;

Seeking to improve the organisation of its structures through constant rationalisation efforts, both to optimise the allocation of its resources and externally to expand its expertise and market access for its key activities;

The need to innovate continuously, not only by introducing new products, but also by adopting innovative approaches, both in the production process and in the customer/user approach.

3.2.2.3 Performance Driven by ACs

One question asked of survey respondents concerned the performance achieved as a result of inter-company cooperation. This performance was considered in terms of the results obtained from the cooperation. The general consensus in all cases was that the changes brought about by the cooperation had been beneficial in several respects. In fact, it was about what each party had improved in their day-to-day management. From this point of view, four levels or types of performance were achieved.

3.2.2.3.1 The Inter-Company Cooperation Agreement is a Framework for the Emergence of Local Entrepreneurial Dynamism

All types of CA integrate the territory and proximity into their approach. Indeed, the assessment of the effects of the mega-trends of globalisation leads SME managers, in their circumvention strategy, to place the concepts of proximity and territory at the heart of their analysis. Two lines of thought can emerge: due to its small size, the SME is forced to favour, at least in the early stages of its activities, the dimension of proximity in its management methods and, consequently, in its cooperation; the local territory in which the small business operates can sometimes also serve as a foothold, or even a springboard, to facilitate the company's access to greater opportunities, even internationally, within the framework of the AC. The cases studied allow us to highlight or consider SME management as a mix of proximity for a number of reasons. First, SME management once again proves to be specific. Many authors have already demonstrated this specificity. (Gervais, 1978; Julien and Marchesnay, 1987; Marchesnay, 1991; Julien, 1998; Torrès, 1998, etc.) Each of the characteristics associated with the specificities of SME management can be analysed as a particular form of proximity. Thus, proximity contributes above all to the coordination of work in SMEs.

Drawing on the coordination mechanisms implemented through cooperation, we can observe that proximity changes the nature of organisational relationships and the effectiveness of coordination methods. Using the typology of coordination mechanisms developed by Mintzberg (1982) with a view to integrating the concept of proximity into our understanding of organisations, we can consider that mutual adjustment and direct supervision are the modes most sensitive to proximity, unlike others that facilitate remote management and coordination (standardisation of processes, results and qualifications).

FGAE, for example, despite its strong propensity for international cooperation through the launch of new projects, has concentrated its training offerings in a single location, MOUKONDO in Brazzaville, Congo. This is a way for the company to better coordinate its work. Such an approach has been observed in almost all cases.

In terms of decision-making, there is a strong interconnection between finalisation (strategic), coordination (administrative) and operational (operational) decisions. The manager or leader appears here, according to Marchesnay's (1991) terminology, as a composer, conductor and sometimes performer. The CODEC manager was the main initiator of his project based on trust in rural and poor populations.

This attitude stems from the cultural proximity of this leader, who himself comes from this background and maintains a strong relationship with this context, whose realities and potential he knows deeply. It is logical that he is able to offer them well-adapted products and thereby demonstrate that the populations of this environment are also bankable.

The head of SECU is himself a front-line operational manager. As a doctor, he is heavily involved in production activities within his company, despite his other administrative management responsibilities.

The geographical locations chosen in the various cases are also influenced by proximity. Cultural, linguistic and geographical proximity have often been decisive in the choice of areas or territories in which to establish or develop activities. Similarly, similarities have been observed in the legal forms of the companies. A standardisation of norms has also been observed.

3.2.2.3.2 Inter-Company Cooperation Agreements: A Fertile Source of Momentum for Strategic Organisation Programmes

To further characterise an organisational programme, it is necessary to specify the nature of the CA as a strategic action, its progress, its concrete processes and its key players, who are the drivers of transformation. The organisational programme then emerges as the point of convergence between strategic and political learning dynamics.

The CA processes at the heart of the organisational programme are organisational facts that result from a staging, with actors who engage in dialogue and, above all, courses of action, mechanisms defined in time and space, and methods.

From this point of view, the organisational programme did not generally create exceptional experimental situations, pilot situations, test cases or organisational prototypes. It simply attempted to make compatible a situation in which a normal organisation and an emerging organisation operate in parallel, playing on the tensions and differences between them.

Strategic dialogue was necessary to disseminate the management team's vision throughout the company, and very often all of the company's internal social partners were involved in the project. The content of the strategic dialogue is therefore in fact a key element of the programme, i.e. the capacity for strategic growth and contradictory dialogue

within an SME.
AC is an exercise in formulating strategic intent. It also simultaneously aims to develop a capacity for strategic growth that is acquired both locally and globally, stimulating strategic creativity at both levels and transforming the ways in which decisions are made, resources are allocated and management is carried out. AC is therefore a structured and coordinated operation that requires guidelines, opportunities for ownership and opportunities for discussion.
The evaluation of the experiences discussed is decoupled from normal management. A pace is set, but each entity remains in control of its implementation. With this in mind, the CA approaches studied were based on gradual planning of activities, reflecting the caution of the actors involved.
The objectives for penetrating new markets were spread out over time: SECU was to enhance its services and technical platform every two years. A similar approach characterised the roll-out of new products: CSPRAF set itself a target for market share to be gained in each CEMAC zone country every year.
We can therefore conclude that the management of the CA is based on the dramatisation of experiences, which brings together the sometimes ambiguous nature of the guidelines and the intermediate state of learning.

3.2.2.3.3 The Modes of Inter-Company Cooperation Envisaged are Flexible in Nature

CAs are set up privately by the managers of small businesses operating in a constantly changing environment. In this respect, the characteristics of CAs reflect the logic of independent, entrepreneurial actors who are in favour of transformation and who have identified opportunities given their organisational constraints (small size, financial health of the company, etc.) and environmental constraints (threat of current and potential competition, direct and indirect, industrial, economic and legal context, etc.).
The primary purpose of CAs appears to be commercial. A commercial purpose is less restrictive than an industrial or research and development purpose. It accounts for the majority of the CAs studied and seems to best meet the desired prerequisites: flexibility and independence. This type of market-based CA promotes greater confidence in the conduct of business.
If successful, the AC can then move towards a broader vocation (research and development, production, training). This behaviour can be observed, for example, at SECU, CODEC, FGAE and ACG.
The financial commitment, know-how and expertise required are sometimes perceived as a risk of losing flexibility and independence. This commitment is therefore limited. ACG has integrated a design office into its organisation to facilitate internal research and development, avoid dispersing energy and ensure control over its business. CODEC has also created a dynamic research and development team within its organisation. To this end, a young, dynamic and creative team is carefully nurtured to think about the development of the company and to constantly innovate.
The legal and economic environment also influences the form of the CA. CAs have been set up in an environment experiencing a high degree of concentration. Although, in general, the CAs studied did not result from mergers or takeovers, SMEs have sometimes been in favour of certain cooperation operations that do not lead to a loss of autonomy or independence. SDV has thus resorted to technical cooperation with its German partners. CODEC has benefited from cooperation with Dutch partners.
The form of CA can therefore be characterised by various criteria: the logic or strategic vision of the manager, the specific characteristics of the organisation he or she heads, the tactical or strategic stakes of CA, and the favourable or threatening environment that facilitates freedom of action or forces strategic readjustment.

3.2.2.3.4 The Transnational Nature of Inter-Company Cooperation Models

SME managers think in terms of regions rather than nations. From this point of view, CA management systems have a regional cultural component.
By temperament and experience, managers have built their CAs thanks to their ability to develop and their willingness to assimilate cultures of different origins. CAs involve small businesses that are aware of their strengths (flexibility and independence) and their weaknesses (small size, sometimes limited financial resources). However, these SMEs are highly exposed to international competition.
They operate in sectors with strong international competition. From this point of view, they are forced to adapt their offerings to international competition. From this perspective, the products offered must comply with new environmental requirements while also reflecting local culture.
Observation of the behaviour of the cases studied highlights that this logic has been followed: firstly, all the SMEs in our study, based on the ACs considered, operate internationally. Secondly, the constant is that they all choose regions that are close to them, either geographically, culturally or even linguistically, as part of their international expansion. Congolese SMEs primarily cover countries in the CEMAC zone, which are culturally and geographically close.
Next, they cover African countries that are linguistically close. This means that the transnational approach of the CA also stems from a cultural identity. This identity has two characteristics: selfhood and otherness. The challenge is therefore to take what is good from one's own culture and borrow what is good from the culture of others. This is why the offerings of the SMEs studied are glocalised. The transnational nature of the activities can also be seen in the organisational forms of the SMEs.

4. Conclusion

At the end of this article, we can conclude that any form of CA considered in any company undergoes a gradual evolution that affects almost all of the company's functions. It is therefore a new dynamic that requires company managers to make considerable efforts to develop original strategies. These efforts have been felt most strongly at the human and technical levels, at the managerial level and at the financial level.
These incremental efforts have fostered the emergence of modes of cooperation that are primarily commercial in nature and, subsequently, industrial in nature. These cooperation agreements have effectively led to improved performance in five areas: mastery of proxemic effects; development of organisational flexibility; strengthening of organisational capacity; and gain of expertise in the transnationalisation of business.

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